

Assabet River, Great Meadows, and Oxbow National Wildlife Refuges

CCP Finalized

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adopts Comprehensive Conservation Plans for Assabet River, Great Meadows, and Oxbow National Wildlife Refuges

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, we, our) has adopted the final Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) for three of the eight refuges in the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Final approval of the CCPs for Assabet River, Great Meadows, and Oxbow National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) was announced in the Federal Register on January 10, 2005. CCPs, which are required by law, guide all aspects of refuge management in a consistent framework that will last for 15 years.

Draft CCPs were published in July 2003. The Service received nearly 2,000 comments on the draft Plans, which were carefully considered in the refinement of management proposals that were outlined in the draft. Please, see the next page for some ways in which we modified our original proposals in response to concerns that we heard.

Libby Herland, Project Leader for the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex, remarked "This is an exciting time for the refuges. The programs that we have outlined in the CCPs are important to ensure healthy wildlife populations, as well as provide recreation

opportunities that are consistent with our legal mandates. We recognize that some of these decisions were difficult to make and will be controversial. There were a wide variety of opinions expressed throughout the planning process."

Some highlights of the plans include improving habitat management, opening or expanding hunting and fishing opportunities, and opening Assabet River NWR to the public.

Some other changes soon to come include prohibiting dogs from the refuges, and charging an entrance fee at certain refuge locations.

Changes will not occur overnight, however, the approval of the final

CCPs authorizes our refuge staff to start implementing them, and it will take time. We will notify the public in advance, and will provide additional information on those changes as we implement them.

Opening Assabet River NWR to the public is particularly exciting. The Friends of the Assabet River NWR have been hard at work with our staff to improve public safety on that refuge. Buildings have been torn down, razor wire and obstacle courses have been removed, and trails have been newly covered with wood chips.

One of the controversial decisions in the CCPs was the proposal to create or expand hunting opportunities on the refuges. Our proposal to allow hunting on the refuges raised strong opposition. That is not surprising, given the suburban nature of the area.

At the same time, however, a large number of individuals, sportsmen's groups, and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife strongly supported adding the areas we will open for hunting to the list of lands already open, given the lack of hunting opportunities now available in many of the surrounding towns. Hunting on refuges is a priority use for the Service when it is shown to be compatible with refuge purposes. Hunting on the refuges will not begin until October 2005, and will be closely monitored.

Another example is dog-walking, which has been occurring for years on Great Meadows and Oxbow NWRs. Those refuges will no longer allow dog-walking, whether the dogs are on or off the leash. We will launch an awareness campaign before we fully implement those new regulations. "Certainly, there will be a phase-in period," said Herland. "We want to make people aware of the changes, and give them an opportunity to adjust. It was a tough decision, but one that we made for the benefit of the wildlife at the refuge, in particular, for its birds and turtles."



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Highlights of the changes

We originally proposed to allow jogging on Great Meadows and Oxbow NWRs. We completed a Compatibility Determination (CD), which concludes that jogging is compatible with refuge purposes. However, because of some site-specific concerns, we will initiate a study this spring of jogging, and evaluate its results to determine site-specific impacts on refuge wildlife. We will review the CD in 5 years, and make any appropriate changes using the site-specific data from that study.

We originally had proposed to eliminate all picnicking from the refuges. We have clarified our rules: no picnic tables will be provided, nor will large gatherings or events involving food be permitted. Eating snacks on refuge benches or on trails is allowed.

We had originally proposed to provide a variety of hunting opportunities on all three refuges: to provide hunting on Assabet River and Great Meadows NWRs; and, to expand hunting on the Oxbow NWR.

- We have modified our original hunting proposal, based upon additional analysis of state-mandated safety zones, our ability to effectively administer the hunt program, and to balance the needs of the different wildlife-dependent recreationists.
- We have clarified that the waterfowl hunting areas along the Concord and Sudbury Rivers at Great Meadows and the Nashua River at Oxbow include the main stems of the rivers as well as adjacent wetlands and pools.
- We have adjusted the waterfowl hunting areas to remove areas near concentrations of houses,

playing fields, or high numbers of additional recreationists.

- We are now proposing a total of 1,192 acres for waterfowl hunting at the Great Meadows and Oxbow NWRs.
- We have revised the deer hunting program to archery hunting only, in areas of specific safety concern.



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We have revised our proposed fee program to be consistent with fee programs at other Region 5 refuges, and to encourage the purchase of our local, annual refuge pass. Fees will now be required at

Assabet River and Oxbow NWR (south of Route 2), and the Concord impoundments of the Great Meadows NWR. Visitors would be able to use a Federal Duck Stamp, Golden Age Passport, Golden Access, or Golden Eagle Pass for the refuge access fee. All access fees are per car or per group for pedestrians.

We have not modified our proposal to eliminate dog-walking on Great Meadows and Oxbow NWRs. We have not yet opened Assabet River NWR to the public. When we do, dog-walking will not be allowed.

Although some of our decisions were difficult, and some controversial, we made them because they help fulfill the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System; they best achieve the purposes of the refuges, their visions, and their goals; they maintain and, where appropriate, restore the ecological integrity of the refuges; they address the significant issues identified during the planning process; and, they are consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management.

We look forward to seeing you on the refuges!



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You can download the CCPs on-line by visiting the Complex website, at <http://easternmanwrcmplx.fws.gov/plans.html>. They are also available on compact disk or hard copy. The on-line and compact disk files are in color; the hard copy is in black and white. If you would like a copy on disk or a hard copy, please contact Bill Perry, Refuge Planner, by e-mail at Bill_Perry@fws.gov, by phone at 413-253-8371, or by post at Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife NWR Complex, 73 Weir Hill Road, Sudbury, MA 01776.

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